

Socialism could be fun...?

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Having a keen interest in both everyday life and GDR (well, actually in the socialist past), I visited the “Dictatorship and Everyday Life in the GDR” exhibition while in Berlin in April 2007 (the exhibition is on until July, 29). Set up by the [German Historical Museum, the exhibition aims to show “How the citizens of the GDR succeed in coping with their everyday life.”](#) [[link: Scroll down for Panoramic Pictures](#)] The collection spreads across two floors and is arranged in themes – work and retirement policy, education and family policy, for example. The life of GDR citizens is represented largely through the official insignia, such as party membership cards, school/work uniforms, birth/school/pension certificates, work records, newspapers, posters and so on. There are also a few typical ‘resistance’ items such as blue jeans, The Beatles records, and some bohemian art pieces. While the exhibition is impressive in its size and organization, I was disappointed. For me, such artifacts relate to the ideology (dictatorship) aspect i.e. the structuring of everyday lives, but do not necessarily tell much of what that everyday life was like. They certainly do not provide any insight into the question of “How did the citizens of the GDR succeed in coping with their everyday life?”

Leaving the exhibition, I was wondering if it was at all possible to present in a museum format “state and dictatorship, on the one hand, and strategies of daily life, on the other.” After all, “strategies of daily life” are meant to be enacted...

But then, I just happened to be passing by a sign inviting to a [“GDR Museum Berlin.”](#) It turned out to be a private museum, located across the Palast der Republik, the now-half-demolished, former house of the East German parliament. Opened sometime in 2006, the museum aspires to offer “a hands-on experience of everyday life in the GDR.” Like the German Historical Museum

“Dictatorship...” exhibition, the museum collection is organized thematically. Namely, the museum has displays on family, work, education, culture, fashion, housing, holidays and consumption in the GDR. While the museum’s concerns and themes are overlapping with those of the “Dictatorship...” exhibition, its display could not be more different. Two points of difference are particularly noteworthy. First, there are hardly any glass showcases, rather the display is an arrangement of a smaller scale concrete-slab apartment block buildings, the ubiquitous symbols of the socialist past still standing in parts of the former socialist countries.

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The windows and parts of the buildings can be open to reveal school notes, camping gear, fashion magazines, shopping lists, kitchen utensils, bottles of cleaners, clothing, movie tickets, and a variety of other things. Visitors are encouraged to touch, play with, sit on, listen to, smell, etc. (and they sure do – see photos).

Second, the museum collection consists mainly of the mundane objects once used by East Germans. The artifacts on display are so ordinary that the curators are compelled to remind visitors that ‘the toilet paper is a museum exhibit, please do not remove.’ The ordinariness of the artifacts is further emphasized through the arrangement of the items with the reference to an individual’s life stages and private experiences such as birth, school years, marriage, childbirth, etc. rather than a historical timeline. Thus, the nature of artifacts along with the way they are presented makes these objects appear devoid of the immediate ideological loading that was readily apparent in the artifacts dominating the “Dictatorship...” exhibition. The museum addresses this issue in a straight forward fashion. It features a little Stasi corner, a miniature Berlin Wall and numerous slogans on its red walls. Perhaps more interestingly, the museum frames (sometimes literally) the tension between the daily life and ideology, the lived socialism and the proscribed one, in exhibits themselves. For instance, the set of baby clothes is overlaid with the charts of the party-planned and the actual birth rates in the country. Then, the display of camping gear and photos of nude beaches is juxtaposed to the map of places the East Germans were allowed to travel to. The

examples of such juxtapositions are many.

While the museum treats its subject matter with respect and seriousness, it does have a Disney-ish feel to it. Firstly, in contrast to official (state) exhibitions, this museum is not shy about presenting GDR as a spectacle, an entertainment, a market(ing) offering for tourists' consumption i.e. essentially about making GDR a commodity or at least using it as a brand that sells. At the exit the visitors are offered an extensive collection of the GDR merchandise and there is also a café where they can try some East German treats.

Secondly, the GDR museum is about entertainment first, and about education...afterwards. History is (made) fun here. There is no explicit commentary or particular path for visitors to follow. Rather they discover for themselves the museum's script by locating artifacts partly hidden in the drawers in the maze of socialist apartment blocks. The artifacts are not labeled and/or described individually, but organized in themes to be experienced. For example, with headphones in a Stasi corner, visitors can eavesdrop on people exploring the recreated GDR living room in the other section of the museum. Other experiences include starting a Trabant auto, trying a garment from a wardrobe, learning dance moves while listening to the East German pop hits, watching a GDR fashion show or a party parade, playing a game of soccer for a winning East German team, to name a few.

In this way, to use a cliché, history is made exciting and accessible to many (and one does see kids and young people enjoying the museum)... Of course, at this point the critics of the museum and its approach might exclaim “what (kind of) history!?” And, I do not have an answer to that but I’d note that despite the Disney-ish feel (which, I understood, was supposed to make me uneasy), I liked the museum. I was pleasantly surprised at the playful and lively atmosphere in a museum talking about the socialist past; this is a notable departure from the way the socialist life is usually discussed and presented. Besides, in my view, this tiny private museum gives a better insight into “How the citizens of the GDR succeeded in coping with their everyday life?” than the “Dictatorship...” exhibition or a permanent display on GDR at the German Historical Museum, for that matter. The museum’s extensive collection of mundane objects suggests that the citizens of the GDR ‘coped’ by engaging in very ordinary daily activities so familiar to people anywhere - they studied for exams and danced at discotheques, cleaned their flats and cooked dinners, used contraceptives and watched soccer on TV...and yes, there were party parades. But, it is these routines of daily human living that possibly made the socialist life with all its politics and ideology bearable. Academically speaking there is nothing new in this, but it is a refreshing message to hear from an exhibition devoted to the socialist past.

References:

- 1. Brochure for the “Dictatorship and Everyday Life in the GDR” (March 30 – July 29 2007; From the Collections of the German Historical Museum)
<http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/ddr/index.html>
- 2. Brochure for the “GDR Museum Berlin: a hands-on experience of history” (permanent exhibition) www.ddr-museum.de

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